

CATHERINE'S HIDDEN LIFE

send the *Veltro* whom thou didst see in vision, if he is ever to come."¹ Although « Guelf" and " Ghibelline " had long lost all significance, the factions continued. The Italian cities either groaned beneath the heavy yoke of sanguinary tyrants, or, if they still ruled themselves as free republics, were torn by internal dissensions and harassed by fratricidal wars with their neighbours. And the anarchy of the country was intensified by the presence of the wandering companies of mercenary soldiers—Germans, Bretons, English, Hungarians—now in the pay of some despot, now in that of a republic, but always fighting for their own hands, levying large ransoms from cities as the condition of not devastating their territory and exposing the country-people to the horrors of famine.

The moral state of the land matched the political. The absence of the Popes, the example of the evil lives of the ministers of the Church, the growing immorality of high and low, were bringing religious life to a standstill in Italy. The Franciscan revival was utterly a thing of the past, while the encyclical letters of the Generals of the Dominicans testify to the deplorable degeneration of the Friars Preachers.² There is abundant evidence in the *Revelations* of Birgitta, and in the *Dialogue* of Catherine herself, that moral corruption was rampant in the convents and monasteries, amongst men and women alike. Many of the secular priests openly kept concubines ; others were usurers ; not a few followed the example of that bishop recorded by Dante, who was *trasmutato* <T Arm in Bacchighone, " translated from Florence to Vicenza," and did worse.³ The spirit of worldliness, of wickedness in high places, stalked unabashed through the Church, while the three Beasts of Dante's allegory made their dens in the Papal Court.

In the year after Catherine's birth, 1348, the great Pestilence, brought, it was said, in two Genoese galleys from the East, swept over Italy, Provence, France, and Spain, and in the following year spread to England and the rest of Europe. Giovanni Villani, the

¹ *Comentum super Dantis Aldigheni Comoediam*, iii. p. 181. ^a Cf. especially the encyclicals of Simon Lingonensis (1359) and Elias Raimundi (1368), *Monumenta ordinu Fratrum Praedicatorum historica*, torn. v. pp. 299, 306. • Cf. *Inf.* xv. 106-114 with the *Dialog*), cap. 124.